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Forked tongue, will travel

An unfair amount of publicity in the current East-West public relations war is going to Mikhail Gorbachev, when indeed other Soviet officials also toil away at what seems an impossible task: portraying the U.S.S.R. as a peace-loving, trustworthy, and misunderstood kind of place with whom deals can be made.

Mr. Georgi Arbatov was on the Larry King show the other night and as usual was introduced as head of Moscow's USA-Canada Institute, which sounds something like a Brookings Institution — independent, non-ideological, credible. But the USA-Canada Institute was created by Yuri Andropov when he took over the KGB in 1967 to sweet talk the West and gather intelligence. Defectors say that at least half the staff is KGB or GRU, the Soviet military intelligence unit. No wonder he says such funny things.

The Cold War, he explained, was launched by the U.S., the first shots of which were fired at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Forget Stalin and the Berlin Wall and the rest of it, Mr. Arbatov counsels. That's just more Cold War rhetoric. When Mr. King asked if everything was America's fault, Mr. Arbatov admitted that the Soviet officials were only human, so they make mistakes like everyone else. Therefore, Stalin, whose policies killed at

least 17 million people, was not one of the great beasts of history, but one of the great bunglers. Whew.

Human rights abuses in the U.S.S.R.? "How about the U.S.?" wonders Mr. Arbatov. "We all have them," he insists, and those couples like the Scharanskys who wish to live together "number only about four or five," and they often owe their separation to the fact that one of them is held on criminal charges. The crime Anatoly Scharansky committed, of course, was to join the Helsinki Watch group — a naive act perhaps, but hardly one deserving imprisonment.

If the on-air calls this Shakespeare of moral equivalence received are any sign, Americans don't buy any of it. This caused Mr. Arbatov to mourn the high level of ignorance about his country, which could have something to do with the lack of a free press there, but let it pass. Underneath all the talk about the PR fight is a presupposition that both sides have the same product to sell, and the hearts and minds of the world will go to the slickest hawker. But most people have no trouble deciding between life in the U.S. and in the U.S.S.R., which explains the Cold War better than Georgi Arbatov ever could. But Lord knows he'll get plenty more chances before November.